

Public Prayer: The Sacred Moment
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Jeni Cook, Director
Chaplain Service
Department of Veterans Affairs

Offering public prayers for official ceremonies may be one of the most frequently requested, yet often poorly prepared duties performed by federal chaplains. As we know, *anyone can pray*. However, not everyone does offer an effective public prayer. Like our preaching, the quality of our public prayers will shape how others view the professionalism of the individual “pray-er,” and it will also shape how others view the professionalism of chaplains, in general.

In the span of one to three minutes, the chaplain has the opportunity to focus the audience’s thought on what is deeply meaningful. We ask our “prayer participants” to transcend what is happening around them and focus briefly on God. It is an awesome responsibility and one that is highly visible. The chaplain has only a few words to utter, but the potential impact may be immeasurable.

Unfortunately, some public “pray-ers” assume that since they have a great deal of experience in praying, they can always pray “off the cuff.” Sometimes, we *are* asked to pray *without warning*, and we can hope that when this happens, God’s Spirit will lead us. However, if we have been notified in advance that we will be asked to lead in public prayer and we do not prepare, it often reflects either the chaplain’s laziness or arrogance.

I disagree with those who believe that the Holy Spirit is always more directly at work in spontaneous prayer. The Spirit of God leads us just as well in the privacy of our offices or homes, as we *prepare* the prayer. The question arises: “Would you prepare your words if you were given three minutes to address the President of the United States?” If so, then we might offer God at least the same level of respect. And regardless of how many individuals or what sector of the American public we pray with, they also deserve better than what comes off the tops of our heads. Sometimes we say things inadvertently in spontaneous prayer that alienates or offends others. It is an activity that deserves preparation.

An effective public prayer cannot be long. Once I stood during a 12-minute prayer offered by a minister prior to the seating of a White House breakfast. I suspect that even the most devout in the group quit praying around minute 5 or 6 and became lost in the details. I confess wondering if this would be the clergyperson's 15 minutes of fame. We must be careful never to forget that the public prayer is not about the one offering it. It doesn't matter if the public cannot remember the chaplain's name. It matters only that the prayer assists them in knowing God by name.

Sometimes program planners will attempt to tell the chaplain how long he/she can pray. Once I was told that I could have between 30 seconds and one minute for the prayer. I thought that rather restrictive and told the planner I would need time enough to make the prayer *meaningful*. "If we don't have a minute for God on the program, then perhaps we shouldn't *pretend* that we believe prayer to be meaningful activity," I said. Effective prayer is more than just an element of program *protocol*. Our prayers must be more than ornamental.

I always ask if it is an invocation, a benediction, or both that is requested. I have made assumptions that caught me off-guard and unprepared. The question also allows the chaplain to do some educating of the program director, if that is needed. More people than I thought do not know what to call the prayers at the beginning or the end of a program.

It is also a very good idea to ask for details about the event when someone invites you to offer a prayer for any program. Once I was asked to offer a prayer in a hospital chapel for a Memorial Day program for hospitalized veterans. I clearly did not ask enough questions. There was no written sequence of events or printed program. After the ceremonial opening that included the Pledge of Allegiance and the Invocation (in which I prayed about the meaning of Memorial Day and the sacrificial giving of one's self on behalf of others), beauty queens were introduced and I learned that the program was partly planned as their opportunity to practice their talent in front of a live audience. I left when the belly dancer began, having learned an important lesson. Fortunately, there was no request for a benediction and the following year, we all agreed that not all programs called for prayer.

Nevertheless, *usually*, when the chaplain is invited to offer a public prayer, the opportunity is great. This does not mean that it is an important opportunity for the chaplain to meet, greet and rub elbows with important

people on the dais. It means that this is an opportunity to do God's bidding. More people are in attendance at some of these programs than gather to hear us preach in a year's time. The chaplain is in a position to speak to some in the audience who may, in no other setting, hear a word from God.

The chaplain's words must be carefully crafted to succinctly bring a transcendent perspective and a sense of God's holy presence. The prayer also expresses to God the honest thoughts and needs of the people. Before writing the prayer (which I believe should always be written out fully, but prayed with inflection and passion), the chaplain should outline the points to be made. I find these most salient points by asking questions such as:

- *What role does God play in this event?*
- *How does God think about what is happening/what we are recognizing in this event?*
- *How do we (the people gathered for the event) participate in what God is doing or wants to do here and now?*
- *In what way is this moment holy?*
- *What are the spiritual needs or pains of this audience at this moment?*
- *What does God want to say to us about those needs?*
- *What do we need to confess to God?*
- *What do the people of God need to do as a result of this event?*

Questions such as these almost always bring thoughts to mind that should be vocalized. They also bring an emotive "tone" to the prayer.

The best public prayers avoid embellished language and phrases that are so over worked as to lose meaning. In fact, sometimes an unexpected (yet meaningfully appropriate) "startle effect" will catch the attention of those who are in the habit of dozing off when they hear the words, "Let us pray." By startle effect, I don't mean grandstanding or shock effects that cheapen the moment. However, God's word, which we hope will be uttered in the prayer, cannot be heard if the audience has subconsciously drifted into a sleep mode. The startle effect can sometimes be accomplished simply by being *honest* about how *the chaplain* is thinking and feeling. It is fairly safe to assume that we, and our audience, share the same struggles. Three days after the terrorist attack on America, and after hours of working and reworking a program to meet the needs of VA Central Office employees, I

began my prayer with, **“We are tired, God. We are tired of seeing and hearing of violence, death and destruction. We are tired of the fears that have welled up inside us, and we are tired of the pain.”** It was not the way anyone expected the prayer to begin, but because my audience had just returned into the building after their *second* evacuation in three days, I believe that most identified with those words and decided to listen a little longer.

When we offer public prayer, our job is to facilitate the communication between our audience and their God. We are servants in this process. The goal is not that the audience will compliment the chaplain on how well he/she prayed. The successful public prayer leads the audience to focus far *beyond* the chaplain, to no longer need the chaplain to facilitate such prayer. Symbolically speaking, I imagine that in one hand, I hold God’s hand. In my other hand, I hold the hand of those in the audience. My goal is to place them hand in hand so that my words will lead them to their own.

Finally, the most frequently asked question about public prayer is whether or not the prayer can be concluded “In Jesus’ name,” or can include any other reference to the chaplain’s own faith preference. In worship services of specific faith groups, there is no doubt that the chaplain can and should make the prayer specific to his/her faith group congregation. For more secular programs (as opposed to worship services), the answer must be found within the heart of the chaplain. I have always found that the foundational themes of my faith can be woven into my prayer in such a way that those in the audience who share my faith recognize them. This allows me to pray with sincerity and integrity to my faith. Yet, I can do this without excluding and offending others. My assumption is that if I am to represent God, then I must do so in ways that unite people and bring them together. The one I am called to represent is not the author of alienation.

Sample Prayers

(Prayer offered on behalf of VA employees, VA Central Office, Washington D.C., September 14, 2001):

We are tired, God. We are tired of seeing and hearing of violence, death and destruction. We are tired of the fears that have welled up inside us, and we are tired of the pain.

And Lord, we confess a sense of shame in the truth of these statements, because there are so many others whose suffering is so much greater than our own. But this is our suffering. And we need Your help.

You are a God of grace and mercy and hope, and so we trust in your promise to hear when we cry out to You. And we claim your promise to heal our lives, and heal our land. Let the intensity of our emotions motivate us to participate in the healing You will most certainly bring.

There are dark days ahead, so we ask for Your light. We are grateful that You understand when we can't help but ask, "Why?" Yet, we also pray... that evil will never make sense to us.

Go with us now, and bless us with the firm conviction, that while evil may win a few of the battles, Your love will ultimately win the final war. In Your Holy Name, we pray. Amen.

(Prayer offered at Arlington National Cemetery, Veterans Day, November 11, 2001)

Almighty God of Enduring Freedom:

We pause today to acknowledge that freedom is Your gift. We have not created it; and we cannot sustain it without You.

But this amphitheater is filled with veterans who know the imperative of making whatever sacrifice is necessary so that all people may enjoy your gift of freedom. Beyond this amphitheater lie the remains of hundreds of thousands of veterans who, likewise, have fought the good fight, finished the course, and kept the faith. They have maintained our freedom and honored your Sovereignty.

We thank you for the brave American men and women of every generation who have refused to be intimidated by dictators or terrorized by cowards. Bless and encourage our troops today as they defend us against the evil of those who would rob us of your gift. Keep our troops safe, we pray, and give us the privilege of honoring them in this amphitheater in years to come. They are tomorrow's veterans.

Bless all the leaders of our country. In your Infinite Wisdom, guide and direct every difficult deliberation and decision. Give our President and Vice-President, the Cabinet and Congress the insight to weigh the clear and present dangers against the compelling needs. Help them to seek your means to a just conclusion in this War on Terrorism.

And now, Lord, may we celebrate the victories of all American veterans, past, present and future. They have proven our nation's claim that this is still the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Amen.